

Asian Cultural Backgrounds for International Technical Communication

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Asian Cultural Backgrounds for International Technical Communication

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The communication styles of Asian people have often been seen by Westerners as part of a single, unified "Oriental culture." However, there are observable differences in communication strategies among them, mainly Japanese, Chinese, and Koreans. The present research attempts to reveal the deep structure of their thinking and behavior that affects writing styles in international technical communication. Its purpose is to overcome stereotypes, and to understand better similarity and diversity within East Asian countries.

BACKGROUND

People in the contemporary era move from country to country with unprecedented freedom and ease. Some settle down in foreign countries. This is due to the expansion of globalization, not only in economic terms, but also in other activities. Globalization has also caused the expansion of standardized civilization and conflict between civilizations. This means that foreign cultures are also expanding, and therein lies the necessity of coexistence of every culture.

In the present situation, all people need to reconsider the importance of such matters, and what is more, they must strengthen their cultural power so that it is positively evaluated. This is because the creation and dispatch of culture will be more significant as present conditions progress. Since world

peace is a common goal among people throughout the world, even (or perhaps especially) in this present era of conflict, each nation must respect the cultures of other countries. The more people understand other cultures, the more cross-cultural understanding advances, and at the same time, such a richness of culture leads to contributions toward world peace.

PURPOSE

The purpose of our research is to develop tools of cultural awareness necessary to avoid conflicts, misunderstanding and perplexity, and to promote greater understanding of Asian cultural backgrounds and behaviors which will affect writing styles in international technical communication.

PROBLEM

In the field of technical communication as well as in other uses of language, human ideas seldom fit together in the same way from language to language. Among Japanese, Chinese, and Koreans, even ideas on the same subject tend to be arranged in quite different ways within a paragraph. These differences exist because each culture has its own particular way of thinking. How a writer thinks, moreover, largely determines how he or she writes. Technical writers living outside English speaking countries, however, are aware that learning the most effective rhetorical patterns of technical English can help them to acquire an international technical communication ability that is not native to them, although they are otherwise bound by many customs, rules of behavior, and etiquette in their countries. The important question is how to shake themselves loose from conventional ideas. On the other hand, one hopes that technical writers whose native language is English will also make efforts to understand the culturally influenced patterns of thinking and writing styles discernible among Asian people.

INVESTIGATION

The authors seek to reveal the deep structure of thinking and behavior among the people of Asian countries, mainly Japan, China, and Korea, using an internet questionnaire, and face to face interviews.

QUESTIONNAIRE

The authors asked 206 people from different countries about typical communication strategies that three Asian peoples (Japanese, Chinese, and Koreans) employ in technical communication contexts. They were asked how they felt about these three peoples (stereotype) and to consider how they themselves think (self-judgment) on each given topic. We asked them to choose either 'agree' or 'disagree', or to answer 'NA' ('no answer') when they cannot respond to a given question. It is to be noted that we purposely used alternative questions (rather than scale-manner) because we wanted to elicit as much intuitive and stereotypical knowledge as possible from their answers. We have collected data from 194 Asian people including 108 Chinese, 47 Japanese, 33 Koreans, and 8 people from other parts of Asia, as well as from 12 people from Western countries, including the US. and Australia. (109 males and 97 females, overall average age: 26.8 years old).

RESULTS

The questions and results are shown in the diagram on the final page. Each number indicates the percentage for each response, except that the numbers in the rightmost column represent the sample number.

FINDINGS

The following tendencies are observed from the results of the questionnaire. The

authors divide them into four categories, but these items are considered to be connected with and relevant to one another.

1. Initiative

Q1 : J/C/K/YOU do not speak until spoken to?

Only Japanese are generally seen not to speak spontaneously among Asian peoples, while Chinese and Koreans are more often believed to initiate the conversation. In fact, however, most of them are willing to begin speaking before being spoken to.

Q5 : J/C/K/YOU are unwilling to do anything new unless many people are doing it?

Only Japanese are generally considered unwilling to do so, particularly by Western people. In fact, however, most Japanese deny this tendency.

2. Clarity

Q2 : J/C/K/YOU do not give a straight Yes or No?

Japanese are typically seen like this, in sharp contrast to Chinese and Koreans. Moreover, even Japanese say they often do NOT give a straight answer, whereas the other two peoples more often do.

Q3 : J/C/K/YOU make most deals without written contracts?

Only Chinese are relatively seen to do so, while others are not. However, in self-judgment, all three Asian peoples prefer to make deals WITH written contracts.

3. Process/Result

Q4 : J/C/K/YOU put emphasis on the Process rather than the Result?

Many Western people consider Japanese to put emphasis on the process, but they consider Chinese to be more result-oriented. However, it actually depends on individuals in each country.

Q6 : In writing a business letter, J/C/K/YOU usually write the most important topic at the end?

Japanese are typically believed to do this by other Asian people and Westerners, and this is in a sharp contrast to Chinese. However, almost half of Japanese actually do not do this practice.

4. Courtesy & Modesty

Q7 : In writing a business letter, J/C/K/YOU begin with seasonal greetings?

It is largely thought that Japanese prefer this way of starting their business letter by both Asians and Westerners, and, in fact, many Japanese agree to this. On the other hand, it is revealed that Chinese do not usually use seasonal greetings in a business letter.

Q8 : J/C/K/YOU make humility a virtue?

Both Asians and Westerners admit that Japanese attach great value to humility. However, not only Japanese but other Asians also agree to this value. Particularly, most Chinese value humility highly.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

When the results from the self-judgment sections are broken down into the four groups of people (Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, and Westerners) as shown in Figure 1, we can observe that Japanese thought and behavior are the most distant from the Westerners.

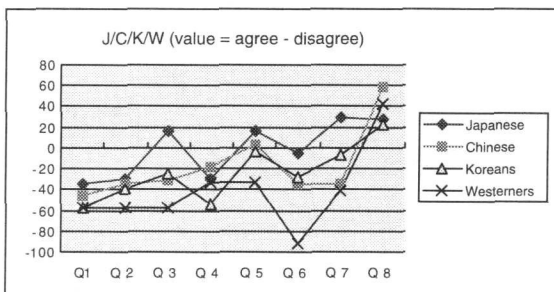


Figure 1: J/C/K/W (self-judgment : agree-disagree)

In Figure 1, each value in the left axis shows the out-balanced percentages (i.e. 'agree' value minus 'disagree' value). As we can see, in most questions, Japanese show the highest value, which means that they are less voluntary, less articulate, more modest, and put more emphasis on process, than the other groups of people. However, these tendencies do not always agree with how they view themselves, or are typically considered by other peoples. Particularly, in the INITIATIVE section (Q1 & Q2), there is a significant disparity between the stereotype and the self-judgment. In other words, Japanese are actually more willing to initiate their talk or to venture novel businesses than was expected. This might be because the average age of the subjects is young (26.8 years old), indicating that this typical Japanese tendency is changing. Additionally, as stereotypical conceptions emerge naturally from the collective behavior of a group of people, such as a business company or organization, the stereotypes collected in this research inevitably reflect perceptions of Japanese people as a group, rather as individuals.

Another thing that should be noted is that Chinese self-judgment in Figure 2 and those of Koreans in Figure 3 look very similar to each other. This shows a sharp contrast to Figure 4, which represents Japanese self-judgment.

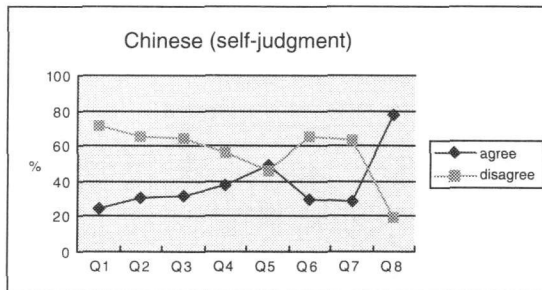


Figure 2: Chinese (self-judgment)

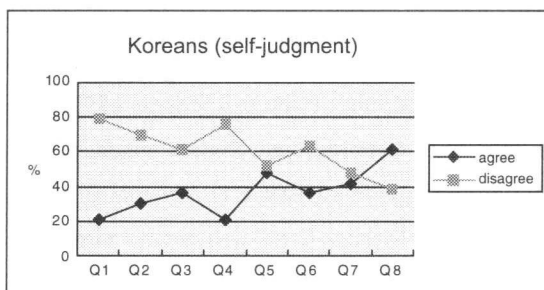


Figure 3: Koreans (self-judgment)

In Q3 (CLARITY section : You do not give a straight Yes or No); Q5 (PROCESS > RESULT section : You put emphasis on the process rather than the result.) ; and Q7 (Courtesy & Modesty section: In a business letter, you begin with the season's greetings.), relatively reverse results are observed between Japanese and Chinese/ Koreans.

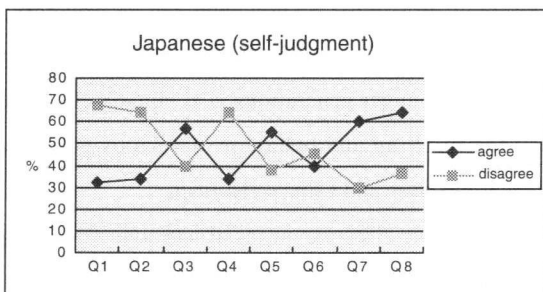


Figure 4: Japanese (self-judgment)

However, these tendencies are much smaller than in the stereotype sections. We believe this generalization is built upon the same mechanism as the above discussion, that is, the factor of younger generations, and the cognitive perception by outsiders of people through group activities.

CONCLUSION

A major difference between the rhetorical discourse of Asian people, particularly Japanese, and that of native speakers of English, lies in the order in which information is presented. Simply stated, people in the West prefer to present information in a DEDUCTIVE manner. This begins with a generalization, and then proceeds to the particulars. Japanese, on the other hand, as a typical example of Asian communication style, prefer to present information in an INDUCTIVE manner. They present specifics first and then state the generalization at the end. This tendency often shows up in technical documents in cross-cultural communication.

As we have already noted, some part of this inductive tendency should be related to the ethnic characteristics of their being less voluntary, less articulate, more process-oriented, and more modest. At the same time, however, while we technical communicators must acknowledge the increasingly conspicuous effects of globalization on communication strategies in Asian countries, particularly among the younger generations, it is equally clear that many gaps remain between the thinking and behavior of various people within Asia, particularly between Japanese and Chinese/Koreans.

The authors believe that one effective means of narrowing these gaps is to teach technical communication at colleges and universities. A detailed explanation of technical language education at the higher education level will be given at another meeting in the near future by the presenters, Hitomi and Yubune, under the title, Integrating Technical Communication Skills into EFL Courses at Japanese Universities.

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RESULTS

1. INITIATIVE

Nationality in	Stereotype (%) (J/C/K people....)						Self-judgment (%) (You)			
	by Asian peoples (n=194)			by Western peoples (n=12)			agree	disagree	NA	(n=)
Question	agree	disagree	NA	agree	disagree	NA	agree	disagree	NA	(n=)
Q1. J/C/K/You do not speak until spoken to.										
Japanese	52	44	4	33	58	8	32	66	2	(47)
Chinese	15	74	11	33	50	17	25	71	4	(108)
Korean	18	62	30	17	50	33	21	79	0	(33)
(Western)							17	75	8	(12)
Q2. J/C/K/You are unwilling to do anything new unless many people are doing it.										
Japanese	55	33	12	83	0	17	34	64	2	-47
Chinese	27	53	20	33	25	42	31	65	4	-108
Korean	20	43	37	17	25	58	30	70	0	-33
(Western)							17	75	8	-12

2. CLARITY

Nationality in	Stereotype (%) (J/C/K people....)						Self-judgment (%) (You)			
	by Asian peoples (n=194)			by Western peoples (n=12)			agree	disagree	NA	(n=)
Question	agree	disagree	NA	agree	disagree	NA	agree	disagree	NA	(n=)
Q3. J/C/K/You do not give a straight Yes or No.										
Japanese	74	21	5	92	0	8	57	40	3	(47)
Chinese	15	77	8	0	75	25	32	64	4	(108)
Korean	14	63	23	0	67	33	36	61	3	(33)
(Western)							17	75	8	(12)
Q4. J/C/K/You make most deals without written contracts.										
Japanese	22	67	11	33	58	8	34	64	2	(47)
Chinese	43	38	19	8	58	33	38	56	6	(108)
Korean	16	43	41	0	25	75	21	76	3	(33)
(Western)							25	58	17	(12)

3. PROCESS > RESULT

Nationality in	Stereotype (%) (J/C/K people....)						Self-judgment (%) (You)			
	by Asian peoples (n=194)			by Western peoples (n=12)			agree	disagree	NA	(n=)
Question	agree	disagree	NA	agree	disagree	NA	agree	disagree	NA	(n=)
Q5. J/C/K/You put emphasis on the PROCESS rather than the RESULT.										
Japanese	41	44	15	50	17	33	55	38	7	(47)
Chinese	28	49	23	8	50	42	49	46	5	(108)
Korean	18	41	41	0	33	67	48	52	0	(33)
(Western)							17	50	33	(12)
Q6. In writing a business letter, J/C/K/You usually write the most important topic at the end.										
Japanese	56	30	14	42	17	42	40	45	15	(47)
Chinese	19	55	26	8	25	67	30	65	5	(108)
Korean	19	38	43	8	8	83	36	64	0	(33)
(Western)							0	92	8	(12)

4. COURTESY & MODESTY

Nationality in	Stereotype (%) (J/C/K people....)						Self-judgment (%) (You)			
	by Asian peoples (n=194)			by Western peoples (n=12)			agree	disagree	NA	(n=)
Question	agree	disagree	NA	agree	disagree	NA	agree	disagree	NA	(n=)
Q7. In writing a business letter, J/C/K/You begin with the season's greetings.										
Japanese	81	7	12	67	8	25	60	30	10	(47)
Chinese	20	52	28	8	42	50	29	63	8	(108)
Korean	25	28	47	0	17	83	42	48	10	(33)
(Western)							17	58	25	(12)
Q8. J/C/K/You make humility a virtue.										
Japanese	77	16	7	92	0	8	64	36	0	(47)
Chinese	57	28	15	50	25	25	78	19	3	(108)
Korean	38	27	35	50	8	42	61	39	0	(33)
(Western)							67	25	8	(12)